

Multimedia



Audio Slide Show
Eternal Frame, Recreated

A Moment in History, Recaptured for a Second Time

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A GROUP of employees gathered in a decorative arts storage room at the [J. Paul Getty Museum](#), surrounded by ornate 18th-century French furniture, much of it having belonged to Mr. Getty himself. But what preoccupied them was a gaggle of neatly tagged objects in the center of the space: a wood-grain Formica end table, knobby orange plastic lampshades and a large assortment of [John F. Kennedy](#) memorabilia.

Brian Considine, head of decorative arts and sculpture conservation, had just promised to refinish a small bust of [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis](#) in "faux gold, like painted plastic." But when he suggested attaching it to the top of a wooden television console, Glenn Phillips, the video curator at the Getty Research Institute, grew uneasy. "We don't want to trash these things," he said. "This doesn't get destroyed after the exhibition."

Mr. Phillips had called the meeting to put the final touches on a new installation, a recreated living room featuring the 1975 video "The Eternal Frame," created by the San Francisco art collectives Ant Farm and T. R. Uthco.



T. R. Uthco / Ant Farm

To create the video, a seminal piece that explores the power of media imagery, the artists re-enacted [Abraham Zapruder's](#) film of Kennedy's assassination in Dealey Plaza, playing all the parts themselves. When the piece made its debut in 1976 at the Long Beach Museum of Art in California, they decided to show it on a console television within an installation that resembled a tatty 1960s living room - to underscore that this was how most Americans experienced this moment in history. They covered the walls and surfaces with commemorative postcards, prints, tapestries, busts and magazines they had amassed while researching the project.

Over time, most of those components were lost, and the video was never shown that way again. But for over a year, Mr. Phillips has undertaken a painstaking recreation of that long-struck set. It will be unveiled in the survey show "California Video," opening at the Getty on March 15.

Mr. Phillips decided to focus on the installation because he found it "such a crucial piece," he said. "It just goes to the heart of what video can do." It also seemed perfect for the show, he added, because "everything about it is Californian" and typical of the "young, intelligent, disenchanted, politically active, slightly anarchistic generation of people who all gathered in the Bay Area."

The Getty is not the only museum that has taken on such a project. Amid revived interest in 1970s art, curators have been scurrying to reproduce long-ago installations and performances. Often, these projects seem to pose an insoluble riddle: how do you recreate an art form whose hallmark is impermanence?

For Mr. Phillips, the answer has been a lot of detective work and consulting two of the artists, Chip Lord of Ant Farm and Doug Hall of T. R. Uthco. He also sought the help of a Hollywood art director, Beatriz Kerti, who worked on the 2006 film "Bobby."

When they began collaborating last August, Mr. Phillips and Ms. Kerti had only a few things to go on: some photographs and drawings of the original installation and an inaccurate inventory list. They also had five tapestries and one decorative plate that Mr. Hall and Mr. Lord had preserved.

Ms. Kerti's assignment was to find the rest: the sagging chair and sofa, the flowered wallpaper, the orange shag rug and other furnishings, as well as the Kennedy memorabilia - prints, postcards, plaques, busts and copies of Life magazine. She made scale drawings, based on the few objects she had in hand; then she began an intensive hunt, relying heavily on Google and eBay.

Ms. Kerti found much of the furniture easily - including the end table, chair and television. But a few pieces were tougher to track down, especially the orange bubble lamp, which had her stumped until she figured out the right eBay search term. Instead of "1950s 3-light-pole lamp," she used "1950s lamp."

For the wallpaper, Mr. Phillips consulted a curator at the [Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum](#) in New York, which keeps thousands of vintage wallpaper patterns in its archives. When the pattern could not be identified, Ms. Kerti hired a company that supplies wallcoverings to the movie business to create a digital version, which can be reprinted when the piece is shown again. The dilapidated couch was built by another industry supplier.

The Kennedy memorabilia was both the easiest and toughest aspect of the project. Mr. Phillips said it "is still really plentiful, it was inexpensive then and it's inexpensive now. It's very rare that we had to pay more than \$100 for something, and it was usually much less than that."

Yet some pieces eluded them - like the busts, all of which had to be refinished, repainted and, in some cases, remolded by the Getty's conservators. "We've never found a single one that matched," Mr. Phillips said, "and we've been looking for months."

They were also confounded by some of the postcards and prints, barely identifiable in the six photographs of the original installation. "You spend a lot of time just looking at shapes and matching color patterns," he said. That was how he finally tracked down a plaque on the end table, visible in only one photograph.

"All we knew is that there was something on the table," Mr. Phillips said. "I was calling Chip and Doug and asking them over and over, 'Do you remember what it was?' Doug finally said, 'I think it might have been a poem.' " After experimenting with different Google image searches, Mr. Phillips found what he was looking for in minutes: a plaque bearing a treacly verse called "Special Delivery From Heaven," which pretends to be a missive from the president to his wife and children. "It was the biggest stroke of luck," he said.

When the artists assembled the installation at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1976, they had only a few days to trawl local flea markets. Yet they carried out rigorous research when making "The Eternal Frame." Before arriving in Dallas with their costumes and a beaten-up limousine, they obtained a bootleg copy of the Zapruder film, studied it repeatedly and choreographed their movements to match.

"We were really interested in how media constructs meaning," said Mr. Hall, who played the president. "The tape is so clearly about how we as spectators can allow this crudely recreated facsimile of a horrendous event to trigger responses in us."

Indeed, although the assassination was "almost an untouchable subject," Mr. Lord said, most of the tourists they encountered were fascinated by their recreation and often deeply moved. The artists decided to incorporate their reactions; in one shot, a group of spectators are seen filming and photographing them. Perhaps that is why the Getty's recreation seems to have such perfect conceptual symmetry.

"Talk about circles within circles," Mr. Hall said. "We went to Dallas to recreate this event. Now, many years later, the Getty is recreating our recreation."



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

MEMENTOS Chip Lord, left, and Doug Hall, creators of a video on the Kennedy assassination.